

# The Bystander Effect in Emergency Situations

A

On a bustling New York City street in 1964, a young woman named Kitty Genovese was attacked and murdered while, as later reported, dozens of neighbors looked on from their windows but failed to intervene or call the police. Though later scrutiny revealed that the details of the case were exaggerated, the incident captured public attention and became the cornerstone for one of social psychology's most famous concepts: the bystander effect. This phenomenon refers to the tendency for individuals to be less likely to help a victim when other people are present. The larger the group, the lower the chance that any one person will take action.

B

Social psychologists Bibb Latané and John Darley were among the first to investigate this effect through a series of experiments in the late 1960s. In one study, participants believed they were part of a group discussion via intercom. During the session, a confederate pretending to have a seizure called out for help. When participants thought they were the only ones who could hear the distress call, 85% responded quickly. However, when they believed others were also listening, the rate of intervention dropped significantly. The findings supported the idea that the presence of others can diffuse a sense of personal responsibility, making individuals less likely to step in.

C

The bystander effect is often explained by two interrelated psychological mechanisms: diffusion of responsibility and social influence. Diffusion of responsibility occurs when individuals assume that someone else will take action, thereby absolving themselves of accountability. Social influence

refers to the tendency to look to others for cues about how to behave, especially in ambiguous situations. If others appear calm or indifferent, individuals may conclude that intervention is unnecessary. These mechanisms help explain why emergency situations in crowded environments often see inaction rather than aid.

## D

Cultural and situational variables also play a role in how the bystander effect manifests. Research has shown that people in collectivist societies—where group harmony and community are highly valued—may be more likely to intervene, especially if they know the victim. Conversely, in more individualistic cultures, personal boundaries are emphasized, and people may be less inclined to get involved. Moreover, the severity of the situation, the perceived competence of the bystander, and the relationship to the victim can all influence the likelihood of intervention. In many cases, if a person feels they have the knowledge or skills to help, such as CPR training, they are more likely to act.

## E

Efforts have been made to mitigate the bystander effect, particularly through public awareness campaigns and training programs. For instance, “bystander intervention” training has become a common feature on university campuses and in workplaces, aimed at encouraging proactive responses to bullying, harassment, and even potential assaults. These programs often teach individuals to recognize signs of danger, overcome social hesitation, and safely intervene—either directly or by seeking help from authorities. The message is clear: doing nothing can have serious consequences.

## F

The digital age has introduced new dimensions to the bystander effect. Incidents of violence or accidents are now often filmed and shared online instead of being responded to in real time. Psychologists warn that this trend reflects a modern form of detachment, where people view emergencies through the lens of spectatorship rather than participation. However, social media has also been used to mobilize help and publicize wrongdoing, showing that the bystander effect is not an immutable human trait but one shaped by context and culture.

## G

In the end, understanding the bystander effect is not just an academic exercise—it has real-world implications for public safety and human behavior. Recognizing the psychological forces that inhibit action can empower individuals to resist them. While human beings are social creatures influenced by those around them, they are also capable of conscious decision-making. Encouraging individuals to act, even when others remain passive, is essential for building communities that respond compassionately in times of crisis.

# Questions

## Questions 1–5

Do the following statements agree with the information given in the reading passage?

Write:

YES if the statement agrees with the claims of the writer

NO if the statement contradicts the claims of the writer

NOT GIVEN if it is impossible to say what the writer thinks about this

1. The story of Kitty Genovese led directly to the development of the term "bystander effect."
2. Latané and Darley's experiment proved that people are naturally indifferent to others' suffering.
3. In the intercom study, participants were more likely to help when they believed they were the only ones who could hear the victim.
4. The bystander effect is less likely to occur if a person feels confident in their ability to help.
5. Training programs have been proven to eliminate the bystander effect entirely.

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## Questions 6–10

Complete the summary below.

Choose NO MORE THAN THREE WORDS from the passage for each answer.

Latané and Darley conducted one of the first experiments on the bystander effect using a staged situation in which participants heard a person pretending to have a (6) \_\_\_\_\_. The study found that people were less likely to act when they believed others were also present, which supports the theory of (7) \_\_\_\_\_. This and another psychological factor called (8) \_\_\_\_\_ help explain why people fail to intervene in emergencies. These tendencies may be less pronounced in (9) \_\_\_\_\_ societies, where people may be more likely to act, especially when they are familiar with the (10) \_\_\_\_\_.

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### Questions 11–13

Choose the correct letter, A, B, C or D.

11. What is the purpose of bystander intervention training?
  - A. To teach CPR and other emergency skills
  - B. To help people avoid dangerous areas
  - C. To encourage individuals to respond in threatening situations
  - D. To train people to film incidents for evidence
12. According to the article, how has modern technology affected the bystander effect?
  - A. It has reduced the effect by helping people communicate faster.
  - B. It has allowed people to offer help from a distance.
  - C. It has led people to act more like observers than helpers.
  - D. It has created more emergency situations.
13. What is the writer's main message in the final paragraph?
  - A. Communities should rely on authorities to handle emergencies.
  - B. Understanding the bystander effect can lead to more responsible

behavior.

C. Most people are unlikely to change their behavior in crisis situations.

D. Social media can help reduce emergency response times.

## Answer Key

1. YES
2. NO
3. YES
4. YES
5. NO
6. seizure
7. diffusion of responsibility
8. social influence
9. collectivist
10. victim
11. C
12. C
13. B